

# Faith Pulpit

## Three Principles for Biblical Church Growth, Part 1

Unchurched millions beset us on every side. Despite this alarming reality, too many Bible-believing churches spiral down negative growth curves. Discouraged pastors may consider implementing trendy solutions; after all, changing times demand drastic measures. Some recent church growth methods work in a post-Christian society, but not all church growth is Biblical church growth.

How should we reach the citizens of a post-Christian society? God's Word provides the answer. The believers of pre-Christian Antioch faced similar obstacles. Their story, recorded in Acts 11:19–30, provides three principles for Biblical church growth.

Syrian Antioch presented an unlikely place for the advance of the gospel. In many ways its society resembles that of modern America. Due to its ideal location, the city functioned as the major political and commercial center for all the Levant. Antioch, according to the Greek geographer Strabo, had developed into the third largest city in the Empire. The city also flourished as a religious mecca. Many temples lined the carefully planned streets, and ritual prostitution took place in some of these sanctuaries.

A large Jewish population resided in Antioch. In A.D. 40, the Jews fell under suspicion throughout the Empire because of their outrage when Caligula tried to erect a statue of himself in the Jerusalem Temple. That same year Gentile rioting in Antioch developed into a fierce persecution against the Jews.

Within the context of all this moral decadence, religious confusion, and racial tension, tremendous church growth took place. Such a large number joined the church that the apostles sent Barnabas to investigate (11:22). He arrived on the scene in A.D. 41. What he found brought gladness to his heart (11:23).

## **I. Reach Out To the Lost (Acts 11:19–21)**

### ***A. Undeterred Outreach***

Several years before Barnabas arrived, believers had come to Antioch as refugees. Three hundred miles to the south, outside the city of Jerusalem, Stephen had testified of Christ through his death. Saul, who consented unto Stephen's martyrdom, then made havoc of the church. Because of this great persecution the believers were scattered abroad (Acts 8:1–4). Some of them relocated in Antioch where, as Jewish believers, they would soon face racial discrimination on the heels of the Gentile rioting.

Undeterred by mistreatment, they preached the Word (11:19). Like many of the greatest evangelistic efforts throughout church history, outreach at Antioch originated from the matrix of hardship, ridicule, and persecution. Resistance often accompanies the presentation of the gospel. Take courage. Paul himself acknowledged that preaching Christ crucified is foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others (1 Corinthians 1:23).

While we would never seek to be offensive, our message by its very nature will offend some. The good news inevitably makes contemporary people uncomfortable. So be it. There is nothing comfortable about Biblical church growth.

### ***B. Lay Outreach***

The word "preaching" (11:19) means simply "speaking." It is not a technical term, and it does not refer to a special vocation. The task of evangelism does not belong solely to an ordained leadership.

At Antioch, lay people confronted the lost with the gospel. Evangelistic encounters primarily took place in homes, businesses, and streets. These are the kinds of places where saved people encounter unsaved people and where mundane conversation can turn to spiritual themes. This contrasts with the situation in some churches today where outreach primarily takes place on a church stage with rock bands and relational preaching.

### ***C. Cross-Cultural Outreach***

Some of the believers in Antioch were twice dispossessed. Originating from Cyprus and Cyrene, they responded to Peter's invitation on the day of Pentecost and then united with the Jerusalem church. They never returned to their homelands. After the persecution which arose because of Stephen, they relocated again—this time in Antioch. These people were more prone to reach out beyond their spheres of familiarity. They spoke to the Greeks also, "preaching the Lord Jesus" (11:20); and a large number believed (11:21).

Here, the word for “preaching” (11:20) means “bringing the good news.” The truth of Christ’s substitutionary death is good news for both Jew and Gentile. The gospel is for all regardless of class, gender, or racial differences (Galatians 3:28).

This kind of cross-cultural outreach differs from the homogenous principle of outreach evident in some churches. The believers in Antioch did not target a single people group; rather, they targeted the people in their community. Jews reached out to Gentiles, and together they united in one church. This was a most unlikely merger made possible by the cross (Ephesians 2:16). Racial oppression raged outside the church, but inside there was peace. “For he [Christ] is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us” (Eph. 2:14).

#### ***D. Straightforward Outreach***

Those who believed, “turned unto the Lord” (11:21), and by inference they turned away from something: Indeed, they did. They turned away from their sin and idols and accepted Jesus Christ as Savior. Paul used the same word for “turn” elsewhere when he commended the Thessalonian believers who had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

The Antioch method of evangelism was in keeping with the message of the gospel. Those witnesses reminded the lost of their sin and of Christ’s wonderful provision. This contrasts with some modern evangelistic methods which make common ground with the lost primarily by drawing attention to their family or financial problems.

According to the Bible, the common ground for all people is their sin and need of a Savior. Truthful evangelism will present this in a straightforward and timely fashion. Calling people to repentance may appear overly confrontational, but it is Biblical.

Two more principles for Biblical church growth will appear in the next issue of the Faith Pulpit.

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